

Water conservation lacking in small communities

By Jim Keyworth, Roundup staff reporter

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While Payson residents labor through the summer under Stage 3 water restrictions, residents of surrounding communities -- including even Pine -- have the green light to use all the water they want.

The majority of those communities are served by Brooke Utilities, the California-based water company whose performance has been closely scrutinized in Pine, where water shortages are commonplace.

Communities serviced by Brooke Utilities, all either at Stage 1 (unlimited use of water) or with no rating system at all, include Deer Creek, East Verde Park, Flowing Springs, Geronimo Estates, Mesa del Caballo, Pine, Star Valley, Strawberry, Tonto Basin and Whispering Pines.

As residents of these communities go about their business seemingly unconcerned about a drought that could last another 20 years or more, Payson residents are banned from washing their cars except at commercial car washes or by high pressure washers, and from filling or refilling pools, spas and wading pools. Other restrictions on town residents include no new grass, no hosing sidewalks and driveways, no watering native plants, no watering between 9 a.m. and 6 p.m., and alternate-day landscape irrigation according to street address.



Kristin Mayes

Payson Public Works Director Buzz Walker doesn't understand why Brooke doesn't pay more attention to conservation.

"I would think that they would, based on the evidence (those communities have) shown over the decades of having water problems," Walker said.

Pat Johnson, president of the Whispering Pines neighborhood association agrees.

"I can guarantee you, we will run out of water Memorial Day Weekend, the Fourth of July and Labor Day," Johnson said. "Those are for sure, and if it hits the 120s down in the Valley, we'll run out of water every weekend."

In a brief response to the Roundup when asked about the issue, Brooke Utilities president Bob Hardcastle emphasized that his company is concerned about conservation. When asked in the past about placing more restrictions on the communities it serves, Hardcastle has said that he was restricted from doing so by the Arizona Corporation Commission, the state agency that regulates public utilities.

Corporation Commissioner Kristin Mayes, in Payson last week for a political speech, said that Hardcastle is probably referring to the fact that the commission has not imposed curtailment tariffs on any Brooke systems in the Rim country except Pine. Curtailment tariffs delineate specific water conservation measures that are implemented during times of water shortages.

The commission only began requiring tariffs after 1998, and only then when a utility comes before it for a rate increase case or another matter.

"Out of the roughly 400 water companies that we regulate right now, 35 have curtailment tariffs, but every one who comes in now is required to have one," Mayes said.

But she also emphasized that the commission is very conservation-minded and would grant a special request by Brooke to impose restrictions on the Rim country communities it serves.

"There is nothing to prevent Mr. Hardcastle from coming into the commission," Mayes said. "He can come in voluntarily, and I think he should come in. In fact, when I get back I'm going to write Mr. Hardcastle."

One objection frequently heard from water company executives is that restrictions make it more difficult for a company to make a decent rate of return. The notion bothers Walker. "That does seem to be the guiding credo of private water companies and municipalities that depend on revenue streams from their water companies for what they consider important purposes," he said. "That's how you cut right to the quick: 'If we got it, we sell it.'"

Hardcastle was asked specifically if he would be amenable to water conservation restrictions if his company could make up any revenue losses with higher water rates.

"I think we would have to (see) the specifics of a revenue recovery plan before we comment," he said. "However, rate payers that now pay more for greater amounts of water would likely have a strong opinion if their rates remained the same for lesser amounts of delivered water."

Walker has a problem with that logic.

"Of course, it depends on which community you're specifically talking about, but how can the close-in ones like Mesa del ignore the drought," he said. "Maybe they don't know that they have dwindling water supplies; maybe they think they have better water supplies than they've shown for the last 40 years."

Restrictions contained in the tough conservation ordinance Walker introduced in Payson last year are based on the previous year's rainfall rather than on the amount of water in storage tanks. Rainfall totals for the 2002-2003 water year covered by the report (April through March) indicate that Payson, like much of the Southwest, remains in a prolonged drought.

While the long-term precipitation average is 22 inches, Payson received only 13.6 inches during 2002-2003 -- 38 percent below normal.

Walker offered a theory for the difference in approaches. "Maybe it's because we're a local government and we have a mission statement and we have a particular philosophy that quality of life comes before growth -- quality of life comes before profit," he said. "You have to take care of what you have first, and nowhere does that show up in a privately held water company. They just don't come from the same place."